CYCLADES MINOR

Schinoussa

Is this my favourite island? In any case, it is the one I think of when I am down. In a few words: someone comes and says, *"You know, Gregory, I've got bad news. You are prohibited to go to all Greek islands* (everything is possible in this country, the sentimental journeys may become a criminal offense). *Except for one. You may choose. Choose now"*. The answer is: *Schinoussa*. Why? I have plenty of reasons.

First of all, I loved Schinoussa because it was an island that I saw every inch of it. How they call it: the world in your pocket? Well, this island was in my pocket. And I didn't care at all about the rest of the world. Of course, I was in love back then. But the love that did last was the one for the island. I don't know if there is anything more beautiful in the Aegean sea, or generally in life rather than waking up in a small, humble totally white house of dark blue windows, watching infinite small fields around you and further down, your own, infinite sea. I don't know if there is anything more beautiful rather than being healthy and in a great mood, starting your day by thinking of "your" beach for the day, a small sandy beach. Then you walk till there, enjoy the sun and sea, play in the sand without any disturbances. I am never disturbed by two, three, five even ten people who enjoy, equally peacefully, of the sea, who respect the landscape and share with you this emotion that ends up getting a bit metaphysical, even if you have never had this sort of tendencies before.

And later, when the sun is right above you, your mood changes and you want something else, also special, once again on your own feet and nothing else, in the pace of your walking, accompanied by the Cycladic breeze. You traverse the dirt road among dry stones and you go to something else, similar but still so different, a paradise shelter.

And later, you meet the same people. You cannot and you don't want to do otherwise. Two or three taverns in the port, Mersini, two three more in the village of Schinoussa called Panagia. A grocery, literally like the old times, the little store where you could find everything, (or you thought you could because you were just a child); and a coffee shop that looks at the sea when the sun rests; and a friendly bar, maybe two or three more where you can listen to the music you like when you are having your drink, before you return to the totally white house with the dark blue windows. And if you share your bed with the person you're in love with, well in that case, according to my humble opinion, you have more than you could ever expect in this life. You have everything.

There is one more small village, called Messaria and (you've known that already from the rest of the islands) the name means that it is set in the middle of the island and in most of the occasions is like that. Here, it is set in the northern side but this kind of information doesn't really matter. You can see the entire island at your ease, within a few hours. If you are a traveller, these hours will be some of the most beloved ones that you have passed in the Aegean. I will now mention some beaches: Tsigkouri, the closest one to Panagia village, the beach of Liolios, the most touristic (this seems a joke when you are in Schinoussa), Alygaria and Psili Ammos (my favorite one) and Fountana (which I also like although it hasn't the spaciousness of the rest). The handmade map that I have (in a photocopy) mentions 15 beaches, there may be more, it doesn't matter. Besides, you will see them all!

Days go by in a way that reminds of sweet routine but it's something more than that, an initiation to simplicity and also to completeness. To the small and majestic (Elytis, the poet (Nobel prize in Literature, 1979), says that better*: this world, the small, the great!* These are some of the most famous lyrics by the poet who worshiped the Aegean Sea and they could, in my opinion, have been written about Schinoussa), dedicated to the white and all together to the entire fan of colours.

As days go by, you meet people and they meet you, you get the illusion of familiarity with a place and a landscape that practically don't belong to you but substantially are yours.
I don't know, traveller, if all these have convinced you. If not, you can sail for the next island. I have already done everything I could to persuade you to fall for Schinoussa. Small, humble, almost invisible, -fortunately- for most people, it is just waiting for you (and me).

EAST CYCLADES

Amorgos

It is certain that this is a much publicized island. It is even more certain that this film (The Big Blue by Luc Besson) attracted many people to Amorgos, often for the wrong reasons. But Amorgos that I loved since not only myself but also the island –touristically speaking- were still young, is a wonderful island that worth visiting. Even if you get there for the wrong reasons.
In Greece, I assume in other countries as well, since the beginning of the 90's, Amorgos was widely known because of its famous vibes. I have never selected an island because someone told me that it has *great vibes*. Let's say that it does have. I am not an expert. But if it is so, then they also do half of the islands that I have written about in here. For me, an island worth visiting for other reasons which are visible just with our beautiful eyes. Our soul follows -but this is another story.
In any case, my soul enjoyed the island most during the first visit, in the beginning of the 80's rather than in the following ones. There were many isolated beaches, there was the unbelievable distance –at least technically as there was no road- between its two main ports, there were too many strange places for you to explore it but still, everything was more innocent and authentic. I still remember of the groups of friends that were formed in the beach, boys and girls who gathered to listen to the music around the fire, the hipsters who laid their sleeping bags in the beach and in the almost non-existent camping –it was just an empty land with a few tormented trees.
It was then when I first saw Chora and I still recollect of how difficult it was for my bike which could not stand the uphill and left me go on, together with my girlfriend –she was my first girlfriend-, on foot till the top while the temperature was over 40 ^{o}C. I was recompensed as I met the most beautiful Chora of the Aegean. I remembered of the poet Nikos Gatsos and I think I understood why he compiled just one poetry collection (it was considered very important for the time speaking) named "Amorgos" and no other poems afterwards but only lyrics for songs. Chora is an enchanting symphony of white with some touches of the rest of the colours. Naturally, I bowed before the beauty of the landscape around the Monastery of Chozoviotissa (you can see the photo I took then) as well as the nearby small rocky coasts. Then I returned (again by ship!) to Aegiali –Katapola is a rather ordinary island village for you to stay there. Still, a visit to the ruins of ancient Minoa, at the top of Mountoulia hill, very close to Katapola is quite interesting. But Chora remains the most beautiful part of the island.
Chora made me feel the same excitement and the following years, exactly like the first time. Amorgos and I had grown up and in a way, had some kind of comfort in our lives. This has certainly brought some changes. You know how these things are. Aegiali was not the same anymore; not even the villages around –where we were going all of the time back then. It could not stay the same with all these trendy bars which had opened to satisfy the Hunters of the Lost Vibes. At the same time, some exceptional hotels have been built on the mountain. Hotels full of luxury, indeed. Of the kind that you can find in every decent island of the world. Of the kind that you can find everywhere. And when you stay in one of these

hotels, it just doesn’t matter where you are exactly. And you are just an ordinary tourist, like every other one –nothing bad to this.
The hipsters are still in the sand; most likely not the same ones, maybe their children. I would like to go to Amorgos with my own daughter. I don’t know what it will have been left from the 80’s. But we will definitely go to Chora. Some things –fortunately- never change.

DODECANESE

Nisyros

Every island is unique, but some islands are …more unique than others. Every island has some similarities with the previous ones, but there are some islands that are hard to find. One of these islands is definitely Nisyros. It might as well be the strangest island that I have seen. Stranger than the crazy Ikaria, than the sacred and distant Delos, even than the mysterious Samothraki (Samothrace).
I went alone there, as was the case with Tilos, during a weird phase of my life, and I arrived after a twenty-two-hour journey (which I enjoyed like nothing else, exactly because it was and still is my big record of staying in a ship to the islands). Proud to finally disembark on the island, I stayed there for some days and the words that I interchanged with the people there were maybe less than the days themselves. When you are in such a phase, then everything seems strange. However, you will see that it was not only the phase I was going through. First of all, the volcano. The volcano that is not only found on one spot, but whose presence haunts the entire island. The volcanic stones, the volcanic type of tourism (because many come here mainly for this) and the volcanic effect that changed the life of the island forever. I was talking earlier about my refusal to communicate with people while I stayed in Nisyros. Communicating was not my strong point, for sure; I listened to them a lot, though. I liked to sit and listen to them for hours, talking in this particular dialect –similar to the Cretan one-narrating stories. Stories that sooner or later mentioned the volcano. The eruption which send away those who had been left behind to struggle with poverty, driving them mainly to Australia and the USA. Stories about the houses that were abandoned forever deserted. Stories about the table that was left laid, as it was forsaken, waiting for the family that left running and never came back. Stories.
The most amazing story, however, comes straight from the ancient Greek mythology and it explains the creation of the island. It is said that it all begun from a war between Gods and Titans. The Titan Polybiotis caused Poseidon´s rage (we know from the Odyssey how touchy the sea God was), so he cut off a part of Kos using his trident and threw it towards the poor Titan. This part was Nisyros. So Polybiotis stayed forever buried under it. The volcano´s eruptions are nothing but the moans of the unhappy Titan.
When I talked before about the volcano haunting the island, I really meant it. No island has so many ghost-villages. None has so many imposing deserted buildings which are not for inhabiting anymore or structures that were completed and never functioned or never finished and just their skeleton remains.
And despite of this fact (or because of this), I loved Nisyros a lot. I liked the quiet seafront in Mandraki (when the boats from Rhodes and Kos stop), of course the volcano, which unlike the one in Santorini (much walking about nothing) is still alive, even the inhospitable black, grey or white pebbles on most of its beaches. Nisyros, with its deserted villages and the scattered, huge buildings, abandoned for a long time, definitely created awe but it is not scary. Not anymore. It looks as it is in the service of a touristic development which has not got the power to alter the wild character of the island, as it has happened elsewhere. For the Lazy Tourist it could just be a sight of Rhodes. The boats that connect the two islands come and go till the afternoon. But how can one see Nisyros in a couple of hours with a stroll down Mandraki and a hasty visit to the volcano?

Nisyros is worth more of one´s time. But I would not say that its strong point is the beaches. The port, Mandraki, which has the most inhabitants, has one beach named Chochlakous. It is worth seeing, although I am not personally a fan of bays with big pebbles. However, Mandraki, apart from the fact that it is a picturesque fishermen village, has the old walls of the ancient Paliokastro (Old Castle) nearby, the Monastery of Panaghias Spilianis (Virgin Mary of the Cave), built in a cave inside a Venetian fortress, but Thermal baths as well. Leaving this spot, this is where the adventure begins, as there are just three villages, Paloi (here is the Lefki (White) beach, the only one with white pebbles in the island), Emporios and Nikia and many “ghost” villages – nothing scary, a bit sad maybe, desert islands. There is also, scarce, communication with the nearby island of Giali (Glass), which has really striking beaches. It is an excellent one-day excursion. A really magical beach is Pachia Ammos (Fat sand), it is big, with a strange dark sand and usually reachable (via a path) just for real travellers.
Leaving Nisyros, and after having bought a T-shirt, something I rarely do in islands, depicting a huge map of the island in the middle (still have this t-shirt) , I felt really funny, then a strange thought popped to my mind. That was when I thought: “I am Nisyros”. The idea of a lonely and weird guy is always charming. But as it is said: careful for what you wish for. Some lonely years in my life followed, and believe me; they were not exciting at all. But Nisyros was not to blame. I hope I will see her again. At least *she* will always be there.